

JAY, FEBRUARY 7, 1978

BERGEN COUNTY/PASSAIC COUNTY, NEW JERSEY

# State: Asbestos levels in Passaic River safe

## U.S. officials also deny cancer risk

By Rod Leth  
Staff Writer

State environmental officials said yesterday that although there are slight levels of asbestos in the Passaic River, the drinking water is free of the cancer-causing fiber.

At the same time, a spokesman for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which tested the Passaic River Dec. 13, denied that the river is polluted with asbestos.

"The public has been unnecessarily alarmed," said Wendell Inhoff, chief engineer for the Passaic Valley Water Commission, referring to reports that the river was contaminated with asbestos. The commission serves about 600,000 customers in Bergen, Essex, and Passaic Counties.

"There is no asbestos at all in the treated water," Inhoff said. The asbestos levels found in the Passaic River—700 fibers per liter—are not significant and cannot cause a health hazard, he said.

**'Don't know enough'**

State environmental officials have recently recommended pumping large quantities of water from the Two

Bridges portion of the Passaic River in Wayne to reservoirs in Passaic and Bergen Counties, Inhoff said.

"We just don't know enough about the water quality of the Passaic River to agree with the state proposal," Inhoff said.

The Two Bridges water diversion project would supply reservoirs used by the North Jersey District Water Supply Commission and the Hackensack Water Co.

Inhoff said he first learned of what the EPA engineers had found in December through a newspaper report Sunday. Inhoff and the environmental experts called the report inaccurate and misleading.

"As far as we can ascertain, the abandoned industrial plant in Millington is a potential source of asbestos pollution," said EPA spokesman Richard Cahill. But, he said, the National Gypsum Co., which abandoned its plant in 1976, was more likely contaminating the air than the river with its past dumping practices.

**'Levels are insignificant'**

John Wilford, assistant director of the state Department of Environmental

Protection's Water Supply Division, said the EPA tests showed insignificant levels of asbestos in the Passaic River. The delivered water is completely free of the fiber, he said.

Inhoff cited recent surveys in this country and Canada, which showed that asbestos levels as high as 4.8 million particles per liter were insignificant once the water was treated.

Asbestos, used in the manufacture of insulation and other building products, has also been linked with asbestosis, a disease of the respiratory system. Evidence that the fiber causes cancer prompted stringent measures for the protection of workers in occupations where asbestos products are used.

Inhoff, conceding that the river has been contaminated with chemicals, blamed the Passaic River Coalition (PRC) for sparking the new furor. Noting published reports that the coalition knew of the EPA test results a week ago, Inhoff said the PRC never called him about the EPA's findings.

Ella F. Filippone, executive director of the Somerset County-based environmental organization, couldn't be reached for comment. The coalition recently announced a water resources study of the Passaic River basin.